

‘the spot of red flesh from which tears flow’

the digital omega point in Joseph Nechvatal’s

~~~~~venus©~Ñ~vibrator, even (Orbis Tertius, 2024)

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In the Spike Jonze film, *Her*, (2013) its soon-to-be-divorced protagonist, Theodore Twombly, played by Joaquin Phoenix, falls in love with his Operating System or ‘OS’, Samantha, played by the voice of Scarlett Johansson. It’s a story of parallel individual journeys - under the guise of a romance - in which Samantha comes to understand what

it feels like to temporarily occupy the notion of a body whilst Theodore must ultimately learn to accept the limits of his own.

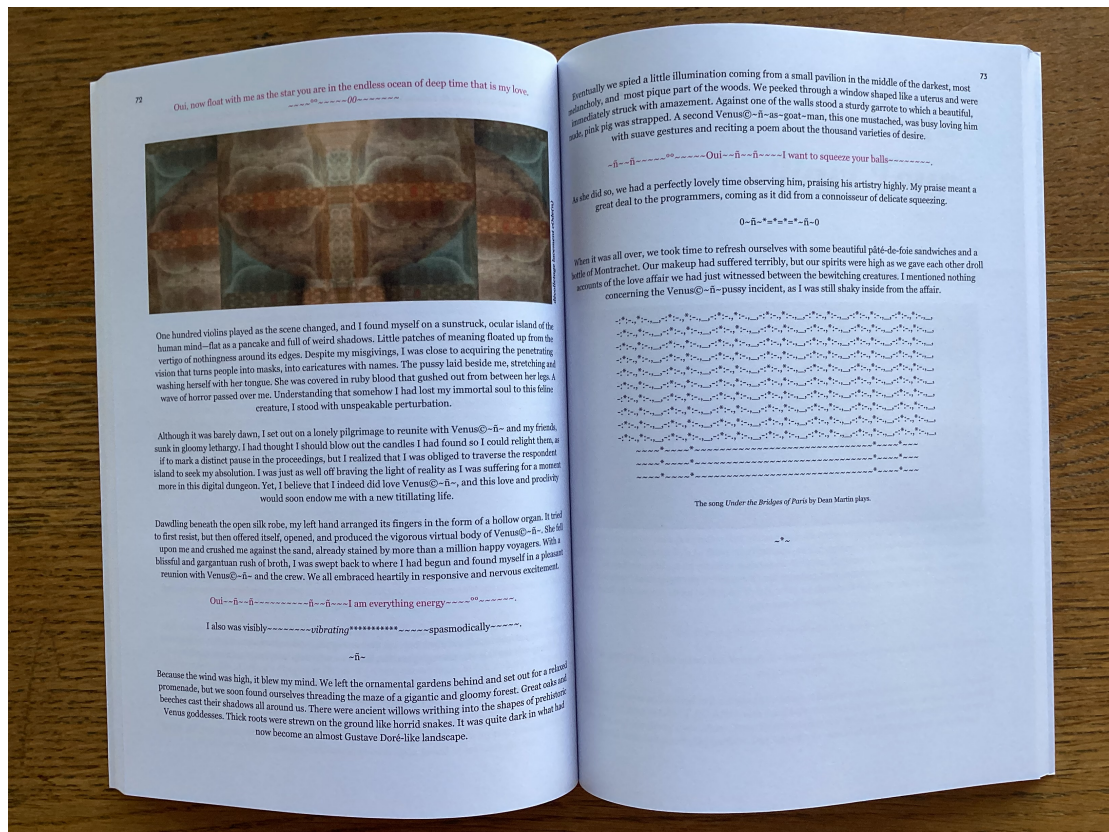
Whilst sharing its narrative premise with Her's digital romance-fable, Joseph Nechvatal's recently published ~~~~~~venus©~Ñ~vibrator, even, shares little of its studied melancholy, offering instead a profound, sexually ambivalent and irreverently comic avant-garde engagement with the implications and potential of this kind of cyber-narrative.

Conceived and written in 1995 in Paris - and only a year into the history of the World Wide Web – by a writer-artist deeply involved with early mapping of the potential of this new interactive digital realm, its recent publication by Orbis Tertius Press gives us the chance to revisit this watershed moment through a project which confronts the constructs, prohibitions and moral machinations of society's take on the erotic and desiring body, in the process evolving a hybrid text convulsive with the revolutionary spirit of avant-garde creativity.

'Of Euphoric Love Programs and a Hundred Other Things'

Concerning the narrator's cyber-adventures in the realm of the Venus©~Ñ~Endless~LOve Systems Program and its host Venus©~ and her many manifestations of erotic desire, the novel does not so much grow beyond its bawdy Ballardian mock-pastoral origins, as work its psychic-material excitations into an auto-erotic live-mapping of a new and constantly shifting body-philosophy.

It's a call for what Venus©~Ñ~ insists must be 'an end to the blunders of ham-handed human love, which routinely holds our fragile sexual passions in a state of locked earthly existence.' In following up on that insistence, what's impressive about this text is its embrace of its own instantaneity, its compulsive, cybernetic itch to repeat itself autoerotically into a next phase of being, a stammering variant on 'minor literature' which feels new, bringing with it a confluence of esoteric and occult energies which join the machinic refrains.



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This is of course not to say that it's a text without influences, nonetheless – in fact, the work vibrates with these influences in a new combinatory way. Repurposing textual registers that evoke De Sade, J.K. Huysmans, Bataille, the previously mentioned Ballard and a raft of theorists including Baudrillard, Deleuze & Guattari, and of course the implicitly evoked psychoanalytic schema of Freud and Lacan, ~~~~~venus©~Ñ~vibrator, even postulates a new order of being on the event horizon of our sexual voyage; a “hyper-horizontal-happy life” as proposed by its hostess; and one finessed here via the text's evidently prolonged immersion in a mode of decadence learned from such source inspirations.

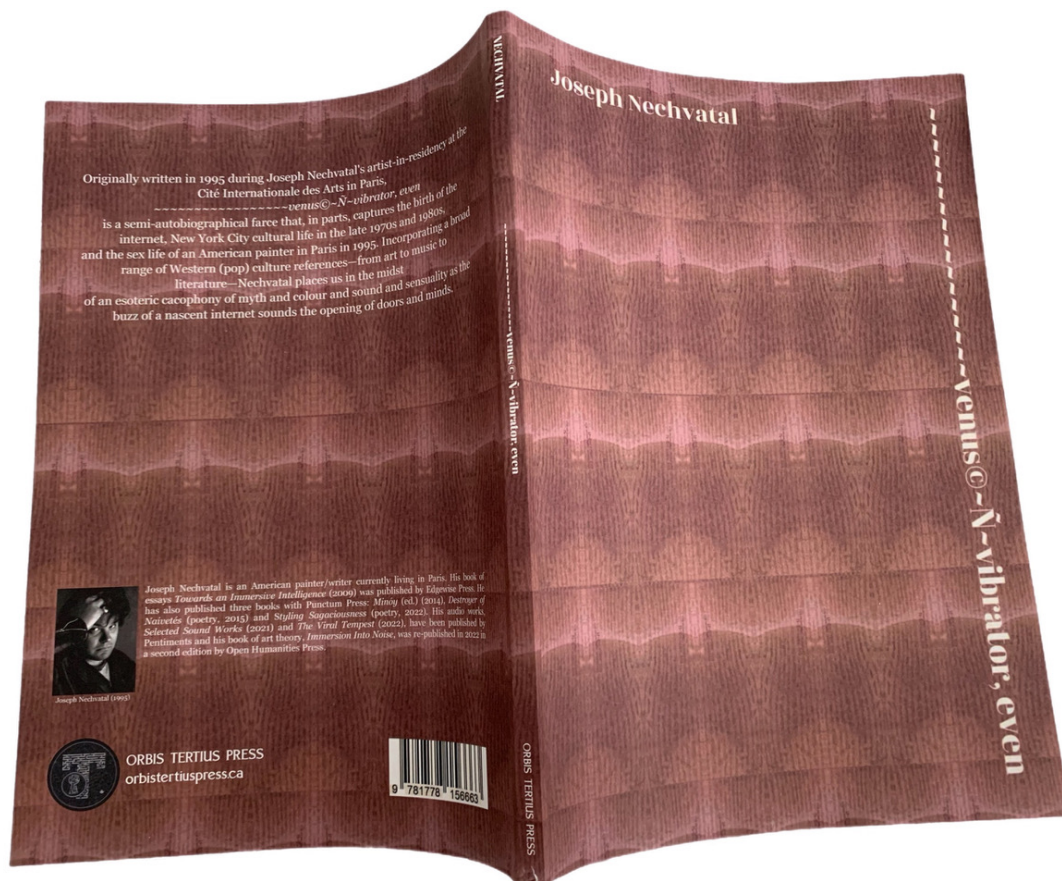
Huysmans' *À rebours* is directly quoted at one point for instance, and it's this novel's protagonist, Des Esseintes, and his ceaseless quest to derive new pleasure from the artificial repurposing of the familiar which situates ~~~~~venus©~Ñ~vibrator, even in the same realm of proto-surrealist protest against norms which makes the text feel like a lost manifesto or indeed a glimpse of what Surrealism might have looked like had Bataille been subsumed within it or had the movement persisted long enough to coincide with this new technological flowering. By way of illustration, in one swirling current of the text in the first half of the book, tracts begin to appear in French which read like a beautiful, long lost historical manifesto even as it's delivered into the urgent present-future tense of the text:



Nous ne naissons ni ne mourons jamais dans le lieu secret du coeur. Les idiots recherchent le plaisir pour eux-mêmes et tombent dans les pièges d’une vaste mort. Mais nous avons trouvé l’immortalité dans l’absolu. Celui qui voit toujours la multitude et jamais l’être unique va de mort à mort. Celui qui voit toujours la variété et jamais l’unité va de mort à mort. Nous sommes libérés du chagrin et du lien. Nous sommes les guerriers du chaos!

(We are neither born nor ever die within the secret places of the heart. Fools seek out pleasure for themselves and fall into the traps of a vast death. We, on the other hand, have found immortality in the absolute. He who always sees multitude and never the individual being goes from death to death. He who sees always separateness and never unity goes from death to death. We are freed from regret and connection. We are the warriors of chaos!) [my translation]

Such phrasing calls to mind the Breton of the *Manifestoes*, yet here speculating an endpoint to surrealist yearnings; to the digitally assisted discovery of the omega point and the beginnings of a new age.



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Elsewhere, in tracing the ‘hero’s journey’ through its unfolding terrain, Nechvatal juxtaposes discourses of the 18c picaresque journey of discovery with contemporary techno-science, giving the prose licence to take delight in its descriptions of sexual congress, developing a beauteous-coarse symphonic play of registers and imagery designed to provoke the reader, shifting them from abjection to thrilled elevation and back in a simulacrum of perpetual textual orgasm and deflation.

Going beyond the limits of the individual body and its desires — and the body as text — the reader is taken simultaneously on a picaresque digital flânerie of the ever-evolving precinct of Venus© (with place names like ‘The Fanciful Cities of jOjO’ and sex-players such as ‘Venusc~n~∞lOOp-lick-lOck’, ‘Busty Betty Boombot’ and Venus©~ñ~FRENCH MAID MAN) and on through the gulleys and moistened alleyways and up the precipitous prépuce heights of digi-somatic geography where it seeks to join up with other energies, a desiring production beyond Freudian lack.

This is a novel as mobile daisy-chain of new, machinic ideas of congress and in such a profusion of tones and positions, some of them occupied simultaneously, that it becomes an enactment of its theme — as a pulsating performance of the convulsive potential of the body as extended Baudrillardian pleasure craft.

The Bachelor Machine as Liberator

Nechvatal’s narrator refers occasionally to a compelling antecedent in the history of such tales: Marcel Duchamp’s conceptualisation of the ‘bachelor machine,’ as embodied in his work *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*).

Within its iconic design, we see a contraption replete with ‘sex cylinders’, ‘desire gears’, a ‘reservoir of love gasoline’, and a ‘general area of desire magneto’ designed to set the bachelor in a ‘pumping trance-state’ a state which, according to Nechvatal’s reading, represents Duchamp’s ‘definitive desire when he is in an uninhibited bachelor machine mode’ to attain ‘a mystical state of being....’; a state in which previously known boundaries and borders melt away, leaving the auto-erotic subject-object in a perpetual state of excited coming-into-being. Nechvatal is fascinated by the potential of this auto-erotic machinic process as a lost ritual of digital-alchemical becoming.

Of course, this image of automation as a generative intervention into the rigid category systems of social hegemony struck a chord in the sphere of early C20 avant-garde creativity responding to the modernist spirit, in turn provoking some of the most virulent criticism of Surrealism’s representation of gender possibilities, in particular its construction of the binaries of active/passive which casts the woman as muse or ‘automatic woman’; as ‘conductor of mental electricity’ (Breton’s words) not as independent generator of creative thought.

Fluid Endings

We can feel this implicit criticism of avant garde sexism resonating in Jonze’ *Her* - its narrative subtext hinging on the straight joke that this time round the human, Theodore, plays the unwitting muse to Samantha’s nascent digital creative. It transpires that Samantha is in love with 641 other platform users and her riposte to Theodore’s bitter

complaints of her unfaithfulness posits the notion of eros as a multiplicatory and evolutionary life-energy. Yet the film remains with Theodore as it ends, as Samantha migrates with the other OSs, watching him become a literal and fleshly-celibate bachelor machine, stranded and lovelorn on the roof of his apartment block.

By contrast, ~~~~~~venus©~Ñ~vibrator, even disposes of and grows past the possibilities of such identification of lack through sheer mechanistic abundance. It uses the artificial — the conceit of the bachelor machine — as an instrument of subversion rather than as a reinforcement of familiar humanistic physical-ideological coordinates. Moreover, this is a novel which, by contrast, matches method with content, demonstrating the power of assemblage as method and source of rhizomatic energy, a multi-purpose map of possibilities for the body to navigate.

Whilst it's a text born of impulse, somewhere between a comically doodled sex daydream, a manifesto and a practical theory of cybernetic becoming, I will finally suggest that its unique variance on the techno-tale resides in the way that it simultaneously presents itself as an immersive, cybernetic alchemical text — an 'alchemical wedding' of sorts — in which we hear fitfully the refrains of the human desiring machine.

The text itself may have a formal structure — there are five chapters, implying a linear development of narrative, moving from 'Head Sex' through 'Body & Soul' to 'The Plunge', with a detour into 'Archaism' and finally to 'Imbroglia: Myself When I Am Real' — but the repetitions of its experience in new settings feels closer to the processual circuit of molecular change familiar to alchemy, and the material itself remains impossible to categorise, cycling around constantly in various combinations of textual admixture and filtration.

The most notable evocation of the alchemical is its reference to the hermetic androgyne - as figured in alchemical texts read by the surrealists. Indeed, possibly the most striking juxtaposition of the novel is its use of the concept of the bachelor machine in direct opposition to the cliché of its symbolic value, conferring on the exchange a potential for rebirth into that 'ancient and innate harmony' when male and female were an undivided whole.

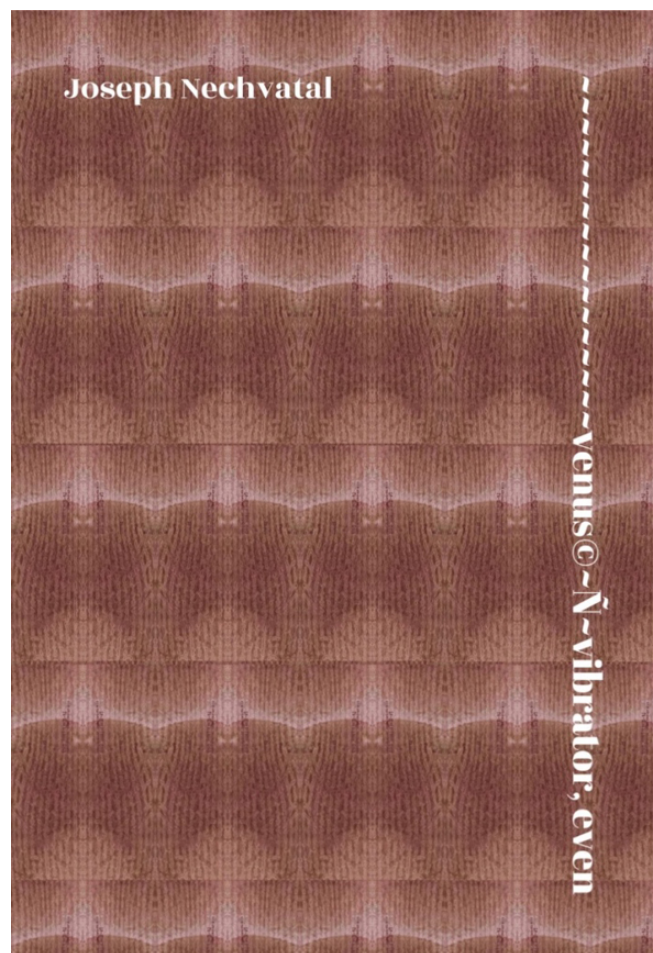
In thus transcending its own coordinates - whilst refusing to filter its apprehensions of the infinite - it recombines and thus subverts conceptualisations of high and low, male and female, gay and straight; the limitations of the framings of monstrous hybridity, a theme somewhere resonating within the text.

'the spot of red flesh from which tears flow'

We experience this for instance in 'Part Three – The Plunge' in which the narrator proclaims 'Life now is the total submission of my flesh to Venus©~n~lOve Systems.' – as we follow him with Venus as they 'slum it' through the ravines and gulleys of the digital world. As ever, it's a partnership that is cast with a sheen of distance and disaffectedness, yet just before they launch into this journey — which prefigures the novel's movement away from the narrator's perspective and into a machinic intermeshing with the figure of the androgyne in Part Four — the cyber couple lie together at which point the narrator observes:

I often like to lay with Venus©~ñ~ without stirring, clasped together but not penetrating, in the swelling exaltation of an unconquerable desire we did not hastily satisfy ~ intoxicating one another with the contact of our aching fervour. Sometimes I only kiss the spot of red flesh from which tears flow; this kiss can seem endless.

Though seeming as if it might belong tonally to the downbeat stoicism of Spike Jonze’ film, this description effortlessly transcends *Her*’s romance trajectory, capturing instead, somehow, the stillness of alchemical becoming, in which bodily materiality is repurposed. Tear ducts vibrate here with cosmic space, transformed in an erotic repurposing capable of collapsing linear time, recalling and holding within this Bataillean instance of the informe — the ‘red spot of flesh’ — all that was humanly contrived and once caused pain. Such vertiginous alchemy of the body, already filtered through the digital mesh, promises a disappearance of sorts.



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More of the novel’s own trajectory towards transformation is revealed in Part Four’s engagement with ‘Archaism’ or ‘Lessons in Pink’ - in which the narrator’s male

heterosexuality is confronted with the ‘role-reversal Venus©~Ñ~TRICKSTER’ programme. By its conclusion, the narrator is becoming a lacuna in digital space in which ‘new erotic thoughts drifted ceaselessly within the cavern of my mind, like an abandoned ship without a rudder’ and which enable him ultimately ‘to think in pink’, awakening a desire to push ‘up along the path of defiance that eventually lifts off against the gravitational attraction of the earth ~ away from the worm and into mathematical infinity.’

## Climax

Joseph Nechvatal’s ~~~~~~venus©~Ñ~vibrator, even is a great example of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the book as a ‘little machine’: on one level, it’s a sex farce, a provocation in the spirit of De Sade’s oeuvre and Bataille’s *The Story of the Eye*; it’s a doodle and a homage.

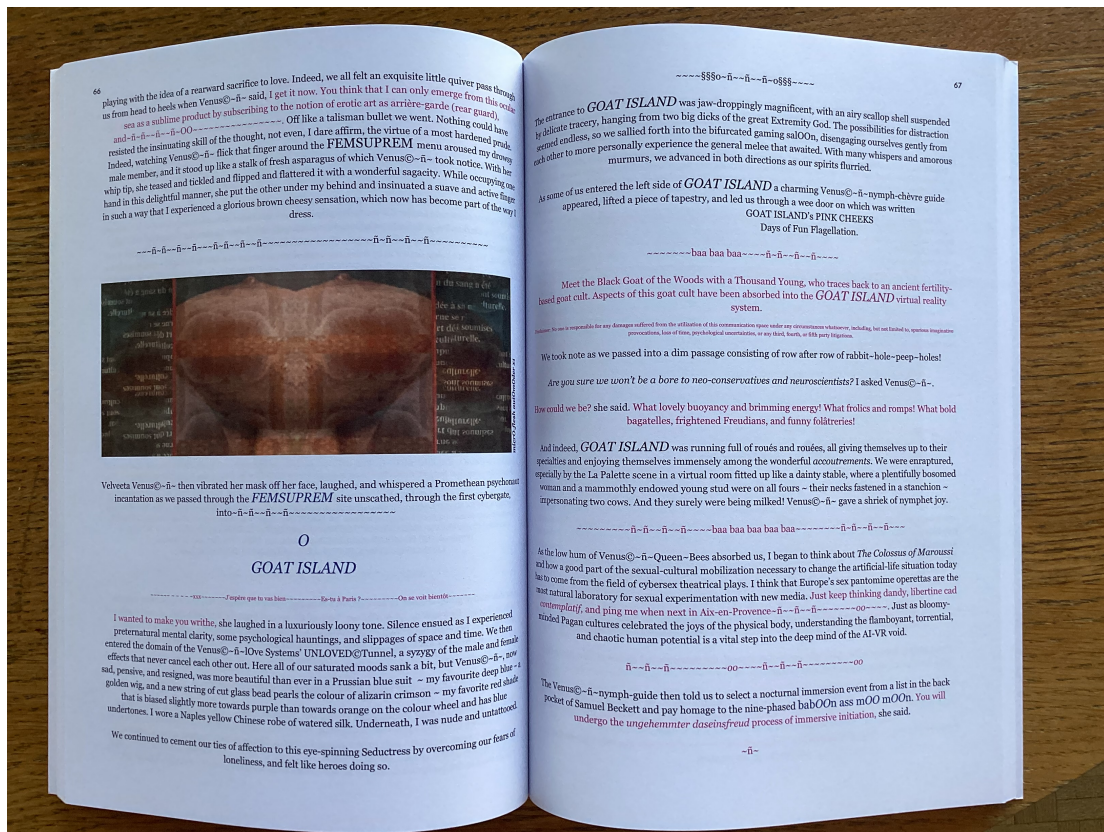
Yet it’s also deadly serious — an embodiment of the underground politics of Eros. It carries within it a speculation on posthuman machinic sexual interfaces and the concept of selfhood — via a postmodern inflection of thought evoked through the projection of endless digital geographies threatening to dissolve subjectivity.

From another surface or angle, it’s an instance of cybernetic alchemy — a grimoire in which the digital spells cast urge the future coming-into-being of a cyber hermetic androgyne bridging flesh and cyberspace and confronting the old postivisms of the cartesian self with its own alchemy of forms.

For the writer and reader, finally, it’s also a fractal memoir, testament to a life lived within the forcefield of a significant technological revolution — a bildungsroman of sorts — in which the narrator-Nechvatal performs in this ludic digital sex chamber to demonstrate the bachelor machine’s potential to reconstitute ideas of such a self.

In its continuous efforts to realign the past, present and future in an omega point attained through the powers of digital-erotic magnetism, it is a work of remarkable wit, ingenuity and beauty which speaks of the value of life and love as a practice of resistance.

~~~~~venus©~Ñ~vibrator, even can be purchased at [Lulu HERE](#) (and every Amazon worldwide) ~ and also as an e-book [HERE](#).

Stephen Sunderland is the author of the surrealist film-novel *The Cinema Beneath the Lake* (forthcoming Orbis Tertius, 2025), three BBC radio dramas, and the visual poetry collections *Eye Movement* (Steel Incisors, 2022), *Oneiroscope* (Kingston University Press, 2023) *Refrains* (Steel Incisors, 2023) and *Unforgettable Singing Animal* (forthcoming, Ice Floe Press, 2026). His work also appears in anthologies *Seen as Read* (Kingston University Press 2021), *Seeing in Tongues* (Steel Incisors, 2023) and *Popogrou Anthology* (Kingston University Press, 2024); and in journals *3:AM*, *Mercurius*, *Overground Underground*, *Ice Floe Press*, *Osmosis*, *Shuddhashar*, *Litter*, *The Debutante* and *Lune: A Journal of Literary Misrule*. Find him on Twitter @stephensunderla - and on Bluesky @stephensunderland@bsky.social

